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## Bhabani Bhattacharya: A Humanitarian Visionary

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### Abstract

Ever since Indians began writing in English, the post colonial experiences dealing with the political and social issues have been rendered exquisitely by major novelists like R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Bhabani Bhattacharya. The post colonial Indian writers have been engaged in relocating the self and retrieval of the native culture from the Western impact. There has been an intellectual exploration depicting both the specific Indian culture and the hybridisation of Indian culture on account of foreign dominance.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, a novelist with an altruistic vision of life, upholds humanism both in principle and practice. His novels which appeared at intervals between 1947 and 1978 explored the realities of life in the country. His novels like *So Many Hungers* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He who rides a Tiger* (1955), *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) and *A Dream in Hawaii* (1978) are an outcome of his minute observation of the common people. One comes across moving scenes of poverty and sufferings of the people, the heartlessness of the rich, contemporary man caught in the whirlpool of the dehumanising life, seeking refuge either in drugs or in proliferating cults. His novels also project transference, multi-dimensional conflict, displacement and alienation of not only the Indians abroad, born on settled there and also of Indians residing in India.

'*So Many Hungers*' offers graphic details of the great famine of Bengal and at the backdrop the struggle for freedom during the Quit India Movement. Destruction and Construction moving parallel. '*Music for Mohini*' evidently focuses on conflict between old age Indian believes and practices and modernity wherein the writer's trust in the fullness and goodness of human life wins. '*He who rides a Tiger*' is primarily a story examining the painful effect of the Bengal famine on the lives of individuals, erosion of values, developing margins within the society and chaos in the Indian belief and practices. '*Shadows from Ladakh*' unravels India during the Chinese invasion. The novelist makes a sanguine appeal for reinstating of the human values and the need for the industrialisation to embark on a journey of progress and modernity. In '*A Dream in Hawaii*' the novelist not only raises the issues of cultural opposition in the postcolonial India but also the issues of social and spiritual alienation.

The contention of this paper is to have a holistic view of Bhabani Bhattacharya's novels in context with his social awareness and use of realism to communicate his humanistic vision of life. The paper proposes to explore Bhabani Bhattacharya as a sensitive writer with a realistic photographic eye sympathising and understanding the problems of contemporary Indian society and suggesting ways and means for the improvement of human life.

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Bhabani Bhattacharya was born on November 10, 1906 in a small town of Bhagalpur in Bihar. He received his early education at Puri and graduation from Patna University. He got his Ph.D. Degree in history from the University of London. His association with Rabindra Nath Tagore proved to be a great boon to his literary career. In his lifetime he has published only six novels and a collection of short

stories. All his five novels - *So Many Hunger* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1954), *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960) and *Shadow from Ladakh* (1966) depict social activism. They embody not only the suffering and aspirations of the individual heroes and heroines but also the cruelties and inhuman acts prevailing in the contemporary society.

He is a novelist who insists on the dignity of man irrespective of caste, creed and wealth, his plea for the practice of compassion as a living value, his crusade against superstition, feudalism, inhuman cold attitude, war, social calamities and distrust are some of the chief characteristics of his humanism. He was awarded 'Sahitya Award' by Sahitya Academy for his outstanding contribution in the field of Indian Fiction in English.

Bhabani Bhattacharya due to his keen sense of social observation was impelled to write his first novel '*So Much Hungers*' on Bengal Famine of 1943 and impact of India's Independence on society. It has a thematic polarity of war and famine. Destruction of war deprives the man of blood and race while destruction due to famine deprives man of his moral values, social responsibilities and keeps him neither alive nor death. Famine transformed Bengal, the land of rich and traditional culture in the land of suppressors and suppressed. The inhuman cold attitude of rich blanketed the whole of Bengal's economy. The emotions of pity seemed to have almost dried up and only jackals and the vultures were in vigorous and jubilant action. The novel '*So Many Hungers*' starts with the turmoil within a family of Devesh Babu and outside in the world but this turmoil existed directly or indirectly throughout the novel. The novelist artistically presented his characters, from the very outset. We come across Devesh Babu, popularly known as Devata, was a great patriot. Rahoul, his younger son, a modern youth yet with inherent qualities of human values, Samarendra Baba, a selfish and profiteer, Manju, Rahoul's wife, preserver of her husband's values Kajoli, a village girl, an embodiment of trust in the magnificence and fullness of life and Kishore, voicing out the novelist's plea that man always has hungers which cannot be satisfied till the end of his life. The novelist in parallel presents his values of life repeatedly through Rahoul, his joyous vision embedded in basic human values. In the agonies of war, the soul of humankind would be cleansed and help the suffering humanity.

The novel offers the graphic detail of the monster of destruction consuming the values of the people of Bengal. There is helplessness of Kajoli due to socioeconomic poverty, migration to Calcutta and struggle against ferocious assaults of existence. Then there is 'Hunger: Innumerable hungers': of food, of survival, of flesh, of enjoyment, of seduction, of money, of power. All showing their ugly faces amidst the human- fight of survival:

*'They had scorched the boats. They had scorched the food. They would scorch the people.'* (p.2)

But as rightly said by Shelley, 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind' so is the spirit of faith, of sacrifice and of beliefs inherent in the blood and veins of Indian people. The novelist reveals his

confidence in man that even in the absence of joy, in the state of bleakness and frustration, there is a secret - throbbing hope. There is emersion of new hope in crisis; there is unmeasured opulence and confidence in man's spirit which awakes with more vigour and vitality when crushed by adversity and mortification.

As Kajoli was forfeiting her chastity to eke out a living for her mother and Onu, she suddenly recalls her father Kanu Bai and her husband who bravely fought for the noble cause: Undeclared all. No jail-house could ever break their spirit and rekindles her faith by believing in her Dadu's last words '*Be strong, be true, be deathless.*'

Bhabani's second novel '*Music for Mohini*' evidently focuses on constant struggle between the old age Indian beliefs and customs with modern ideologies. The novel presents a cross-section of contemporary Indian society wherein rural society is under the shackles of superstitions and irrational orthodoxy.

The cobwebs of superstitions are the outgrowth of centuries of decadence. But on the other hand there is also emergence of scientific outlook of people. The novelist portrays his humanist outlook through the novel that the old and the new, the city and the village, the young and the old can live in harmony if there is synthesis of the opposites. Mohini, the central character, is a modern, sophisticated girl who has absorbed in her personality, the time-honoured values of the Indian culture. The novelist time and again attacks the absurd beliefs and practices and also social problems like casteism, untouchability etc. The novel is quite remarkable in presenting the conflict between the urban and the rural culture and modernity. Mohini learns to traditionalise herself, attune herself to the atmosphere of her husband's village and its big house. Her modern ways are detested by her mother-in-law, who is stern and puts a number of restraints upon her. Jayadev, her husband is a visionary and an idealist. He expects his wife to be different from an ordinary young woman with basic physical needs and requirements. He sees in her an intellectual striding beside him, for a tireless quest for knowledge. Mohini learns to modify herself. The novel is full of clashes and confrontations of ideas. It is not necessary that old is gold or the new need not to be good, but music is a matter of harmonising different notes in a single song. Mohini makes adjustments chiefly to help her husband in enhancing his social development Gandhian programmes. They both develop mutual understanding and strive hard to make their village Behula, an ideal village for whole of the Bengal. Their mutual unity also helps Mohini to ponder over her mother in law's old beliefs and she thinks "*perhaps she saw the wrong side of this old tapestry tradition and missed the design*"(158). She lets her have her own ways. Jayadev understood his wife and safeguards his wife in the end when the ceremonial offering of blood was to take place in the temple of the Virgin Goddess in the name of his offspring. The end expresses the novelist's trust in the fullness and goodness of human life. He brings home the fact that the clear stream of the reason should not end in the dreary sand of dead habits. The novelist also raised issues of the faith of Indians in horoscopes, the belief of wearing of amulet around

the neck to wipe out evils and also on spiritual and religious belief that a son is necessary for the salvation of the father.

Bhabani Bhattacharya reflects his favourism for a modern cultured India without losing the best flowers of ancient Indian culture. His novels embody not only the sufferings and aspirations of the individual heroes and heroines but also the cruelties and inhuman acts of the anti-social and anti-democratic forces of contemporary India.

His third novel *'He who rides the tiger'* too sheds light on the painful effect of famine on the lives of individuals. Rich grudge feed the destitute, but filling the pots of Sadhus. Bhabani Bhattacharya explicates through this novel that how rich ill treat and exploit the poor both in the name of religion and caste. Kalo and Biten the two main protagonists fight for social emancipation and abolition of age old caste barriers. The novelist portrays the moral protest of the real people of the time, the evil system of caste, hypocrisy of rich, human cruelty and erosion of values. The staunch humanism of Bhattacharya attacks the exploiters who profit by people's misery during famine and in the name of caste. The protagonist Kalo feels oppressed by the selfish capitalistic and caste ridden society, which comes in the way of his making a living and enabling him to provide a mouthful to his daughter Lekha and himself. The novelist exposes the superstitions, the sociological obsessions and psychological clashes of individuals, prevalent in a society. The beastly vices of lust and flesh trade of poor and helpless by rich, are depicted with force and satirical fervour.

Bhabani in the novel describes the social and religious hypocrisy of society. Due to hunger and ill treatment Kalo avenges on society by transforming himself into Mangal Adhikari, the Brahmin, and performs a miracle and reaps dividends. Kalo says: "While man died of hunger, wealth grew and kindness dried up, religion was more in demand". The novelist describes people's blind belief in the Yogis and Mothers. Lekha becomes the mother of Sevenfold Bliss. Kalo inspired and stimulated by Biten, breaks the backbone of caste system, Kalo's combat is not with man, but with social forces that make savage and wicked human beings. The novelist no wonder voices out his views through Kalo who despises the dispraises the corrupt and immoral society: "*society, red eyed with rage, had branded him as evil when he had done nothing wrong. But now he is engaged in work truly evil, he was smiled at and paid handsomely*" (75). Due to hunger he and his daughter suffered gruesomely, therefore they decide to ride the tiger - the hunger. "*Lekha sat with him on the tiger's back and they must ride on*" (143).

Thus we see that the novelist adroitly dealing with hunger, unending hunger for mundane pleasures, material possessions and economic profits. But in the parallel the novelist pours forth his optimistic views about Indians that as long as hope remains, man exists, but when it leaves man, it is the end of his life. In this way the novel deals with the tradition, moral and culture of India and lastly, the spirit of freedom flowing through the veins of Indians.

'*Shadow from Ladakh*', Bhabani Bhattacharya's fifth novel won for him Sahitya Academy Award because of the wide ranging themes based on a contrast between rural and urban life, between Steeltown and Gandhigram, between Satyajit and Bhaskar. This paper explores the novelist's plea for a synthesis between spinning wheel and the machine. The Chinese invasion in India is the starting point for the conflict between Gandhigram led by Satyajit Sen and Steeltown led by the American trained engineer Bhaskar Roy. The novelist through this novel wants to convey that without the fusion of Gandhian principles and industrialisation, India cannot progress. He presents the importance of these two opposite cultures through the voice of Biresh, Satyajit's friend:

*"Both", the answer flashed. "This hour in India's national has to be one of conscious amalgam. Its the hour of both dawn and twilight; the two are alike in content. So are the two flesh-and-blood symbols! There is Bhaskar deep within you, Satyajit! And there's you somewhere in Bhaskar, of that also I am sure"* (358).

The novelist has also conveyed the Indian's humanitarianism even though India was attacked by China. Five Chinese children who are rendered homeless are given shelter and love in the house of Bhaskar. The novelist clearly suggests that we may have great respect for our traditional values and culture but our blind adherence to them would be mainly responsible for retardation of India's progress and progressive social change. One can virtually examine that the novelist's cry for a wise compromise between the confrontation in shadow from Ladakh between Gandhigram in cottage industry and Steeltown in heavy industry and between ancient and modern culture. *"Let there be a meeting ground in the two extremes, let each shed some of its content and yet remain true to itself"* (274).

Bhabani Bhattacharya's last novel '*A Dream in Hawaii*'(1978) satirically deals with tension falsehood of the modern world. A staunch humanist in Bhattacharya is at work exploring and examining the Indian life, social practices and their reactions and the American social life. Swami known as Yogananda is caught between the binary opposition of the sensual and the spiritualism. He dons the saffron robes to impress Americans with the Indian sublime culture of spiritualism. At the invitation of the East-West centre, he goes to Hawaii to give a series of lectures on the Indian philosophy. The west is in peril on account of its self induced venom called progress. Setlla Gregson, the American professor of religions in Hawaii who invited Swami felt that myriad Americans were in dire need of spiritual assistance as they were materially prosperous yet inwardly empty. She herself had strained relationship with her husband Walt, who himself was a teacher of literature. Swami Yogananda explains the Vedanta to the Americans emphasising on the need to search the inner soul. He projects as if East and West were beautifully blended within him. Ironically this coalescence goes against to his own teachings as he himself felt confused. During his discourses on Bhagwad Gita, to a captivated American audience and during his meditation he is haunted by disturbing memories of his affair with Devjani, his student at the Indian University and even in Hawaii he visualises her and looks for her. There is continuous binary opposition.

Despite his saffron robes, he has failed to hold his mind. The 'reality' that he is searching for proves an illusion. The Guru that the disturbed Americans see in him is himself torn by doubt about his own spiritual integrity and he returns to India with contradictions within himself. Bhabani Bhattacharya thus in the novel bring out the importance of Indian philosophy of action, free from desire for fruit. Action without desire for its results is the testament of Indian faith.

Thus after examining the above novels, it is evident that the novels of Bhattacharya depict various aspects of social reality. He chose novel as his weapon in war against the evils of society. He is one of the greatest novelists in Indian tradition and his serious craftsmanship adds further dimensions to his so called eclectic humanism. His novels present the true picture or description of the events, whether they are pathetic or devastating. He is a master of presenting social inequalities and injustice in plain yet artistic manner.

Bhabani Bhattacharya, a novelist with a philanthropic vision of life, picked up the common man as his protagonist, portrayed the alien despotism, the long drawn out fight for freedom, the mushrooming of opportunists, the rise of diverse social forces, all competing in an amoral rat race. All these social and cultural trends are beautifully presented through characters that throb with vibrating humanity. His novels project him as a humanist with realism touching the climax. He is a sensitive writer with a realistic photographic eye sympathising and understanding the problems of contemporary Indian society and also the spiritual aspect which has always attracted the west, which in pursuit of soul search, look up towards India.

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